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CHAPLAIN CENTER & SCHOOL

THE CHAPLAIN AND INTEGRATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

The military chaplain, a man of God and a military officer, serves to bring God and man into a proper relationship. Part of this task includes assisting the military personnel into a right relationship with each other. Narrowing this somewhat, the topic of this paper deals with Army chaplains' participation in the racial integration of the U.S. Armed Forces in the late 1940's and the early 1950's.

Before the subject may be discussed with understanding, it is necessary to understand some of the background of that period of history. This was the period just after the war where society was trying to adjust to a peacetime situation as well as cope with the changing roles of many men returning from the war. Though blacks had served their country honorably, not only in World War II, but in prior wars, this is not to say that they were accepted as equals or their service considered without shadow. Remembering that the officers corps of the Army has been made up of a high percentage of men from the south, it becomes less surprising to find less than complimentary comments made from time to time. As late as 1949, official statements were forthcoming from the Army such as:

....there was growing concern among many senior officers of the Army that we are weakening to a dangerous degree the combat effectiveness of our Army. These officers

are familiar with the combat performance of negro troops during the war and feel that we have already gone too far in inserting colored organizations in white combat units.¹

Later that year, the Secretary of the Army, Gordon Gray moved contrary to this advice and issued an order stating that, "...all Army jobs and schools would be opened to Negroes, but integrated assignment was to be allowed only in overhead positions..."² "Several weeks later...a second order was issued by the Army on October 27. This one stated that the limited integration authorized in Secretary Gray's order of October 1 should be disregarded; Negroes should be assigned only to Negro jobs."³

It is quite surprising to the non-politically oriented person to see the orders of a higher level of command so openly defied. With conditions such as this at the top levels of command in the Army, it is difficult to imagine the possibility of sufficient freedom whereby a staff officer might be allowed to be innovative. The chaplain is a staff officer who, although given special privileges and protection, is rated by his commander and his military future is dependent upon these evaluations. The commander, on the other hand, has his own future at stake with every decision he makes. Therefore he must take significant risks when he allows innovative recommendations of his staff to become

1. "Report of the Gillem Board Policy," New York Times 12 May 1949, p. 159.

2. Richard M. Dalbiume, Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces (Columbis, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1969) p. 193.

his policy. Within this context then we look to the contributions Army chaplains have made in the late 1940's and the early 1950's to assist with racial integration in the Armed Forces.

II. THE CHAPLAIN:

His Influence As A Civilian

The military chaplain serves as the advisor to his commander on all levels of command. At the lower unit level he is the implementor of the commander's religious program. At this level the chaplain has the greatest latitude as an innovator. This latitude seems to diminish as one moves up the various levels of command. At the higher command headquarters, although the chaplain remains the advisor to the commander, most of his work is in coordination with other staff sections. Thus as major topics of social change come to the fore at these senior levels the chaplain provides input through coordination with the other sections of the command. When the final decision is made and when the paper is distributed, there are no names associated with the contributions which ended in the final product. At the Department of the Army level it is even more difficult due to the increased number of people and contributions involved.

One method of dealing with such anonymity and the

Frustrations caused by commanders who are too threatened by their situation to allow freedom for their staffs is to leave active duty. As a civilian some things are possible that are not possible while on active duty. One chaplain who was apparently frustrated and decided to take this option was a captain by the name of Grant Reynolds. He had entered the Army six months before Pearl Harbor,⁴ served three years and "resigned his commission 'for his fight against racial discrimination.'"⁵ While serving as a member of the New York State Commission of Correction, having been appointed by Governor Dewey,⁶ he helped form the Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training.⁷ "Their (members of the committee) efforts encouraged President Truman, on July 26, 1948, to issue an executive order directing 'equality of treatment and opportunity' in the Armed Forces."⁸

Although this obviously dealt quickly with years of labor in preparation, it begins to display the magnitude of the potential effect of a dedicated person. Seldom is an individual who is not associated with national politics able to be so influential in changing the history of our nation.

4. New York Times, August 29, 1946, p.25.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., July 23, 1945, p.19.

7. Philip T. Drotning, Black Heroes in Our Nation's History (New York: Cowles Book Co. Inc., 1969) p.193; and Dalrymple Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces, p.155.

8. Drotning Black Heroes in Our Nation's History, p.193.

III. THE CHAPLAIN:

As Military Pastor

Chaplain Charles E. Byrd wrote in The Chaplain of March 1946 an article titled, "The World's Biggest Problem." He stated that, "The chaplains could help race relations by giving encouragement to the men to take advantage of the opportunities of the GI Bill of Rights."⁹ He felt that it was important to assist the soldier as he looked forward to civilian life in much the same way the theology of the black church looks to the joy of death and its release from this world of bondage. CH Byrd concludes his article by saying, "It should be made clear that a lasting and durable peace depends upon justice, love, respect for personality, and brotherhood in the fullest sense."¹⁰ This article which was published before President Truman's executive order, begins to speak to the problems of black men. However, it leaves untouched what could or should happen within the Armed Forces.

The more risky approach is of course staying on active duty and finding the fine line between being so innovative that the commander is turned off and presenting the more important challenges in such a manner as to be found acceptable

9. Chaplain Charles E. Byrd, "The World's Biggest Problem," The Chaplain 2 (March 1946): 21

10. Ibid.

by the commander. Such a man was Chaplain (COL) John W. Handy, Jr. (Ret.) who served in numerous senior command positions as Post Chaplain Fort Eustis; Assistant V Corps Chaplain, Germany; 9th Infantry Division Chaplain; Staff Chaplain, Fitzsimons General Hospital; Deputy President and Comptroller, USA Chaplain Board; Staff Chaplain, U.S. Army Hawaii and Deputy Staff Chaplain, U.S. Continental Army Command.¹¹ These assignments covering the years 1952 through September 1969 were especially important in that this was apparently the first time that the Army was prepared to fill these important positions with a black chaplain. Obviously he was a man who won and maintained the respect of his commanders and fellow chaplains.

Chaplain (COL) Mitchell C. Johnson, Staff Chaplain, Presidio of San Francisco, another black chaplain, remembers some of the challenges of his early service in the Army. Though President Truman issued the executive order directing equality of treatment and opportunity in the Armed Forces of 26 July 1948, CH Johnson was assigned to an all black unit at Camp Polk upon his entry on active duty in March 1951.

Referring to that period of time, he states that, "In contrast to the...enticements for aggressive action in the '70's few, if any brownie points were promised or given to chaplains or anyone else for ruffling the waters of racial injustice in the early '50's."¹² Though warmly received by the post chap-

11. Chaplain (COL) John W. Handy, Jr., Personal letter.

12. Chaplain (COL) Mitchell C. Johnson, Personal letter.

lain, CH Johnson felt turned off by the establishment when he attempted to advise them as to what was being done or not done to prolong the explosive situation there. He was told to concentrate his efforts to ministering to his black soldiers in the traditional manner. The implementation of this directive later proved fruitful when the sound relationship he obtained with the whites as well as the blacks was made apparent when the situation finally exploded.

Then came the real crisis - when blacks felt they could not take any more beatings by the military police, improper arrests for nebulous offenses, command lethargy, and they moved out against the white dominated establishment with tanks and heavy artillery commandeered from their own motor pools. I was called out of bed that night by the North Camp Polk Commander and directed to report to the scene without delay. I went without any idea of what I could do. Arriving on the hot spot, and sensing at once the business at hand, I stood on the hood of an MP jeep and delivered an impromptu sermon directed at both the offenders and the offended. I appealed to sanity and reason to avert what I definitely knew was to be the bloodiest battle since the civil war. I finished with a dry throat and wet palms and cautiously got down from my makeshift pulpit. The commander spoke afterwards, and many others on both sides of the battle lines said a few unsavory things too. I don't know who moved first - but it was a great relief to see tanks growling back toward the motor pool.¹³

Chaplain Johnson said that it was after this incident that the command initiated a policy which opened the post social and recreational facilities to all personnel. It should be noted that this post in the heart of the South therefore had its beginning of desegregation in April 1951 almost three years after the Commander in Chief of the

13. Ibid.

Armed Forces had ordered it. It should be noted that Chaplain Johnson initiated no specific action, but was the versatile pastor required by the multifaceted military chaplaincy.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus we see that chaplains can play a critical role in social change and that, although history will probably not record their deeds, they did and will continue to play an active role in assisting the integration of minority groups in the Armed Forces. This statement will be more applicable to some more daring and committed chaplains than others, but this is true in all professions. Though Army chaplains continue to do unrecognized work like this, they will not lose their spirit, for they are men of God.

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